



Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith

On 4 April 2005, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Paul Ray Smith was posthumously awarded the first Medal of Honor for actions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. A combat engineer with Bravo Company, 11th Engineer Battalion, 3d Infantry Division, SFC Smith is the 14th engineer to receive the military's highest award.

Sometimes referred to as the *Congressional Medal of Honor*—because the President awards it on behalf of the Congress—the medal was first authorized in 1861, during the Civil War. Although more than 3,400 Medals of Honor have been awarded since then, they are bestowed only to the bravest of the brave, and that valor must be well-documented.

SFC Smith, who grew up in Tampa, Florida, enlisted in the Army in October 1989 and attended Basic and Advanced Individual Training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. As a sergeant, he became known as a stickler for detail, a trait not always appreciated by his newer troops, who often found themselves doing things over and over again—until they got it right. But SFC Smith had learned from being in the first Gulf War how important it was to train right in order to be prepared for battle.

And because of SFC Smith's discipline, the lives of more than 100 American Soldiers were saved during a firefight near the Baghdad International Airport on 4 April 2003.

On that morning, the engineers were manning a roadblock near the airport when SFC Smith's platoon received a mission to construct a holding area for enemy prisoners in a courtyard next to a watchtower. As the engineers were clearing debris from the courtyard, they were surprised by about a hundred Iraqi soldiers, who opened fire on SFC Smith's men.

Disregarding his own life, and under constant enemy fire, SFC Smith organized a defense against the attack. After seeing that some of his men were wounded and in danger of being overrun, SFC Smith manned a 50-caliber machine gun atop a damaged armored personnel carrier. From a completely exposed position, he fought off the Iraqis, going through several boxes of ammunition and killing as many as 50 enemy soldiers as he protected his men and prevented an enemy attack on the aid station just up the road. SFC Smith continued to fire until he was fatally wounded—the only American to die in the engagement.

Ironically, in the last letter that SFC Smith wrote to his parents from Iraq (but never mailed), he spoke of being prepared to "give all that I am to ensure that all my boys make it home."

According to his wife Birgit, "He loved his country; he loved the Army; and he loved his Soldiers."

"It is an honor to share the title engineer with this great Soldier who exhibited extraordinary courage and selflessness. ...All Americans can take pride in the heroism of this great Soldier and leader, and the Engineer Regiment can be especially proud."

Lieutenant General Carl A. Strock, Chief of Engineers

"We count ourselves blessed to have soldiers like Sergeant Smith, who put their lives on the line to advance the cause of freedom and protect the American people. ...And we express gratitude for a new generation of Americans, every bit as selfless and dedicated to liberty as any that has gone on before—a dedication exemplified by the sacrifice and valor of Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith."

President George W. Bush